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#### IV.

### RECONSTRUCTION AND THE NEGRO.

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THE condition of the colored race of the South has been, for at least forty years, the leading question in our politics. For the most part it has been an unwelcome question, forcing itself into prominence and compelling attention against the choice and interest of most of our political leaders and their followers. The two forces which would otherwise have shaped our political ends—commerce and empire—have feared and hated this issue. The business interests of the country have constantly deprecated its agitation; the pride of empire, the sentiment of nationality, has always deplored its existence and struggled to banish it from the political field. The statesmen who from 1835 to 1860 held the foremost places of political honor and influence were engaged in a continuous effort to settle it by superficial compromises. Their successors at the North, with comparatively few exceptions, refused practically to recognize its essential and controlling power except under the final stress of unavoidable necessity. The same influences were strongly felt at the close of the war. Not a few of the leaders of the party which had pushed the conflict of arms to a successful close resumed the old temper of compromise in dealing with the new phases which this question then presented. Business and the desire for a formal national unity loudly demanded the restoration of the South without further changes than such as the war had actually accomplished.

Throughout this long conflict, the history of which is too fresh to need fuller statement, the nature of the issue touched and enlisted the deepest forces that affect human society. It was primarily an ethical question, a strict question of moral right and wrong. No economical or political tests could alone decide it. Conscience and the moral sense claimed jurisdiction of the question whether the colored race should be treated as men or as brutes, as brethren or as aliens and outcasts from the human family. The

moral convictions of the North would permit no settlement which did not recognize the complete manhood of this race. The stubborn and fanatic bigotry of the South would consent to no settlement which did not leave the political power of the States exclusively in the hands of the white race. Under these influences and circumstances the question, by what methods conformable to our system of government the civil rights belonging generally to other citizens might be practically secured to the colored race, became, in the judgment of a majority of the people, the most serious political problem growing out of the war. The result was the enactment by Congress, over the President's veto, of the reconstruction act of March 2, 1867, making it the condition of the restoration of the seceding States that new constitutions should be adopted, framed by "delegates elected by the male citizens, twenty-one years old and upward, of whatever race, color, or previous condition," and securing to all such persons the elective franchise. Under the provisions of this act all the seceding States were finally restored to their practical relations to the Union.

In the light of present results, the policy of universal suffrage thus enforced at the South is condemned not only by those who originally opposed it, but by many who were hitherto its advocates. It becomes, therefore, an appropriate inquiry, whether universal suffrage at the South, or especially what is commonly called negro suffrage, was a mistake. Such an inquiry should be made, if possible, without reference to partisan opinions or interests. The present condition of the colored race of the South can not be viewed with toleration by any right-minded man who is acquainted with the facts. It is certain, too, from the nature of the question itself, as well as its close relations to all our public interests, that it will remain, as heretofore, an issue which can not be avoided. Settlements may be attempted which shall again leave this race to its fate, to an unaided and friendless struggle with the hostile forces which surround it; but such settlements will settle nothing. In the mean time it is well to consider whether whatever degree of failure may be fairly said to characterize the present results of the plan of Southern reconstruction is due either to the principle applied in the general enfranchisement of the colored race, or to the incapacity of that race to properly exercise the rights conferred.

In determining the correctness of the principle adopted in the enfranchisement of the colored race, it is essential to recall the chief features of the situation when that measure was adopted. A war

of four years, with its enormous sacrifices of life and property, had just ended. The cause of the war was the existence under the Government of the republic of the system of chattel slavery. Aside from this system the Government was essentially republican. All other leading influences had, for more than three quarters of a century, tended toward its harmonious growth, development, and consolidation. Territory and population had increased beyond precedent. A commanding position had been reached among the nations. All the elements of national prosperity and greatness had been developed to a high degree. Slavery, the one anti-republican influence, had put at hazard all this growth and glory. It had struck at the life of the nation. The struggle had agonized the land. The plain and inevitable lesson of this experience was, that our Government, to be safe, must be self-consistent; that, in Mr. Lincoln's words, "this Government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free"; that no anti-republican element can be safely suffered to remain in the fabric of our Government.

This lesson was strongly enforced by the influence of the great principles which inspired the founders of our Government, and still constituted the professed faith of the republic. By those principles the nation was "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Except in the slave States the suffrage had been the sign and safeguard of that civil equality contemplated by the fathers. The extension of the suffrage had kept even pace with the progress of our most prosperous and enlightened communities. The enjoyment by all citizens of the right of suffrage was therefore regarded as the true corner-stone of our Government as well as the best if not the only guarantee of individual freedom. In fixing the political conditions of the seceding States, the traditions and principles of our Government united in pointing to universal suffrage as the true defense of public welfare and personal rights.

But, at the time of which we speak, disloyalty to the national Government characterized the whole white population of the South. The weapons of armed rebellion had but just been wrenched from their hands. To permit the political power of the restored States to be wielded exclusively by this class, was to invite the recurrence of the dangers so lately experienced. A basis of loyalty must be found on which to build the new governments. The colored race alone furnished this indispensable condition of reconstruction. Their loyalty to the Union was undoubted. It was deep, passionate, unflinching. If, then, the conquered communities of the South

were to be restored to political life and to resume their position as States, the logic of republican principles, the principles of the Declaration of Independence, and the logic of events and surrounding circumstances, alike pointed to the immediate enfranchisement of the colored race as the chief feature in a wise plan of reconstruction. Gradual enfranchisement could not meet the conditions then existing. Tests of property or education, if ever wise or admissible, under our theory of Government, were clearly inadmissible here. The application of these tests would exclude those whose influence and participation could alone insure a republican basis for the new governments and the political predominance of those who were loyal to the General Government.

Other considerations led to the same conclusions. It was believed, as the result of our political experience as a whole, that the best method of dealing with the so-called "dangerous classes"—those who have, for the most part, neither property nor education—was to admit them to the full privileges of citizenship. Such, with slight exceptions hardly requiring mention, had been the policy adopted in all the remaining States. It was believed, upon the same authority, that the exercise of the rights of free citizens was the best school for the education of the citizen in the proper discharge of the duties imposed by his rights. These beliefs were the results of experience. They were not theories merely. They were the practical, working rules by which our most successful political communities had carried on the business of government. Those who shaped the plan of reconstruction were convinced that the civil rights and future welfare of the colored race demanded that the ballot should be placed in its hands. They felt that the national Government was charged with the duty of recognizing and securing, so far as legislation could go, the complete civil and political equality of the colored race with the other races under our Government. This was especially due to that race by reason of its whole previous history in this country, as well as its peculiar position at the close of the war. But it was not sentiment alone that guided to this result. All other policies were open to insuperable objections. Direct military supervision of the South, the continuance of the abnormal condition existing from 1865 to 1867, or the return to power of those who had previously exercised exclusive political control, were the only remaining policies. Neither of these policies could be justified by reason or experience. That temporary evils would arise from the

immediate enfranchisement of the colored race no man doubted, but the men who supported the measure believed, with Macaulay, that "there is only one cure for the evils which newly-acquired freedom produces—and that cure is *freedom*. When a prisoner leaves his cell, he cannot bear the light of day; he is unable to discriminate colors or recognize faces. But the remedy is not to remand him into his dungeon, but to accustom him to the rays of the sun. . . . Many politicians of our time are in the habit of laying it down as a self-evident proposition that no people ought to be free till they are fit to use their freedom. The maxim is worthy of the fool in the old story, who resolved not to go into the water till he had learned to swim! If men are to wait for liberty till they become wise and good in slavery, they may indeed wait for ever." They believed, with Mackintosh, that "justice is the permanent interest of all men, and of all commonwealths," and that "the love of liberty is the only source and guard of the tranquillity and greatness of America." They believed, with Abraham Lincoln, "All honor to Jefferson; to a man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day and in all coming days it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression." To men of real faith in the principles of our government, to men who loved and practiced justice, who held that governments exist for the good of all the people, the immediate and unconditional enfranchisement of the colored race of the South was an act and policy supported by the highest sanctions of political justice and civil prudence.

The charges now brought with most frequency and apparent effect against this policy are, first, that it was unjust and cruel to the white people of the South thus to subject them to negro rule; and, second, that the enfranchisement of the colored race was a deliberate giving over of society to the control of ignorance, a reversal of the order of Nature and Providence which demands that society shall rest on intelligence and capacity, not on ignorance and inexperience.

To the first charge the reply is that colored suffrage was not the subjection of the white race to negro rule. The white race retained its suffrage, with all its immense advantages of property and education. Colored suffrage was simply placing the two races on the

same plane of civil and political rights. It was the giving of a fair field and an equal chance to the members of both races. It was the removing of all legal or artificial hindrances from the path of the one race, without diminishing a single right or adding a single burden to the other race. Nor was this true only of the legal situation and relations of the two races. No restriction or hindrance in fact existed, under this policy, to the freest and most effective use and influence of all the advantages which property, education, and political experience necessarily gave to the white race as a whole. No such obstacle existed either as a proper consequence of the policy of colored suffrage, or of the temper of that race toward the other race. That policy had no elements but justice and civil equality ; that temper was friendly and generous. The sole cause of the political supremacy of the colored race at the South was the willful and deliberate refusal of the white race to contribute its proper and natural influence to the practical work of government. They chose to yield to the embittering influences of defeat and race-hatred, rather than to act the part of faithful citizens in guiding and controlling those whose ignorance and inexperience most imperatively required their aid. The necessary results of such conduct on the part of a class occupying such relations to any community, under our form of government, are obvious and uniform. It was as if to-day the greater part of the tax-paying and educated class in New England and New York should cease from all influence or aid in the work of government, and sullenly leave public affairs to the control of such as might be left to take it. Or, more exactly, it was as if that class, not content with refusing all aid in the conduct of public affairs, should seek, in a spirit of bitter and vengeful hostility, to deride, dishonor, and embitter those into whose hands they had surrendered the political power. It is certain that no state or community could suffer such a separation and antagonism of its elements without plunging, more or less rapidly, into temporary misrule.

But with what patience would just and reasonable men listen to the charge, especially when coming from those who had forsworn their political duties, that this result was due to the false and cruel policy which had established universal suffrage? The indignant reply would be : " Your sufferings are self-inflicted, the just penalties of your own folly and crime ; you have sown the wind, and you reap the whirlwind." The best success of self-government anywhere presupposes a fair degree of coöperation between all classes in carrying on the work of government. If such coöperation is refused by

the class representing property and education, that recusant class, not the policy or principle of self-government, is chargeable with the results, whatever they may be. "I do not admit," said Governor Dix, in vetoing the proposed city charter of New York in 1872, "that misgovernment in this city is proof of the failure of republican government. When the Legislature gives to New York municipal government in conformity with the general idea of American institutions, it performs its whole duty. All further responsibility is on the people of New York City themselves. If they culpably neglect their own affairs, if they will not give to their own political affairs the same attention which the rest of the people, in their several localities, are in the habit of giving, they must suffer the consequences."

The second main charge brought against the policy of universal suffrage in our reconstruction, is perhaps sufficiently answered already. Instead of violating or disregarding any natural or moral law, or law of human nature or society, it was the dictate and expression of the highest morality applied to the affairs of government, the recognition and protection of the natural and inalienable right of all men—the opportunity, without artificial shackles or hindrances, to run the race of life. It is safe to say that there is no political community of considerable importance, either State, city, or large town, in our country, in which the voluntary and complete withdrawal of the greater part of the educated and property-owning class from all participation in public affairs would not speedily produce the state of things which has been denounced, when seen at the South, as the forcible and artificial elevation of the ignorant and irresponsible over the educated and responsible. The cause of such results wherever seen, under our Government, is the same. It is the violation of moral duty and natural law by those who are endowed with the chief power of securing and upholding good government. To raise an outcry against universal suffrage because of results traceable directly to the neglect of their unquestionable duties as citizens, by the educated and tax-paying classes, is a conscious mockery or a pitiable mistake. No better words have been spoken of late on this point than these of Goldwin Smith: "There is yet another class *dangerous* in its way—the class of political seceders. Malcontents from this country are always telling their sympathizing friends in Europe that the best men here stand aloof from politics. The answer is, that those who in a free country stand aloof from politics *can not be the best men*. A



man is not bound to seek the prizes of public life ; he will perhaps exercise more influence for good if he does not ; he is not bound to become the slave of party ; he is not bound to sit in any conclave of political iniquity. But he is bound to do his utmost, in such ways as are morally open to him, to get the best men elected, and to make the right principles prevail. If he can not do much, he is still bound to do what he can. Striking pictures have been drawn of men with high foreheads and intellectual countenances condemned to sit in council beside low brows and stolid faces. But would the matter be mended if the low brows and stolid faces had the council to themselves ?”

And if, it may be further asked, the “low brows and stolid faces” do have the council to themselves, is it the fault of universal suffrage ? Does it suggest the remedy of the restriction of the suffrage until the “high foreheads and intellectual countenances,” without effort on their part, shall have the council to themselves ? Not till we abandon all pretense of faith in the cardinal doctrines of republican government as understood and practiced hitherto in the United States, will it be admitted that it is the province or aim of government to secure to “high foreheads and intellectual countenances” anything more than it secures to “low brows and stolid faces,” namely, a fair chance to exercise their own faculties, follow their own ends, and influence the course of public affairs according to their abilities and the dictates of their own judgments, subject only and equally to such impartial legal restraints as may be necessary to prevent crime and preserve public order. It is not claimed that there is anything sacred about the right to vote, except as it is believed and proved to be the best means of securing those other rights which *are* sacred and inalienable—“life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The ballot is no more than a means of securing the best government, and the best government is that under which all the people rise to the highest plane of intellectual and moral development. The American idea is that, by giving and securing to all the right to vote, the result in the large will always be, at least in any American community, that the various classes will have, each its appropriate influence ; that good government being the general interest will be the general aim ; and that in the process of reaching this end the whole community will be educated and elevated to a degree never resulting from other methods. And further, it is a part of this idea of government, that if for a time evils arise and prevail, the remedy will be constantly in the hands

of those who suffer, and that, whenever such evils arrest the public attention or threaten the public welfare, the general interest will compel their correction and removal. If, then, under this system and in this country, the "low brows and stolid faces" anywhere or at any time have the council to themselves, it is because the "high foreheads and intellectual countenances" have failed to use their proper influence. No single instance can probably be pointed out in our history, where it is not certain that the evils of bad government could have been promptly corrected by the earnest and faithful efforts of the educated and property-owning classes. The Southern States under colored suffrage were not exceptions to this rule. No class ever had greater advantages for securing a proper share of influence in public affairs than the white race of the South in 1867; no class were ever more open or responsive to the influences of property and education than the colored race of the South. The plan of reconstruction did not set the colored race to rule over the white; it did not place ignorance above education. Such results, if they have ever existed, were due to causes which would produce in New England evils similar to those which have prevailed in South Carolina and Louisiana.

If we turn now to an examination of the conduct and capacity of the colored race as shown during the period of its free exercise of the suffrage, it will appear that that race exhibited qualities entitling it to all the political privileges conferred by the reconstruction measures. It is necessary here to shut out the partisan clamor and misrepresentation of the day, and attend only to the authentic facts as the ground of judgment. First, then, it may be said that the colored race gave to the Southern States wise, liberal, and just constitutions. Under influences which elsewhere had led to punitive and proscriptive measures toward those who had supported slavery and rebellion, the organic law of the ten States embraced in the reconstruction act of 1867 shows no instance of a purpose or effort to exclude any classes or individuals from an equal share in all political privileges. The demands of public education were fully recognized and provided for. The methods and principles of taxation were just and enlightened. The modes of selecting judicial officers were such as prevail in the most prosperous States of the North. In a word, the constitutions of the reconstructed States would to-day command the almost unqualified approval of all competent and impartial judges and critics. And the same conclusion will follow from an examination of the general legislation in these

States during the same period. It was, with few exceptions, dictated by the public wants and suited to the public needs.

In the ordinary conduct of the practical affairs of government, much must be said in approval of the spirit and methods which then prevailed. Elections were free, fair, and honest. Political canvasses were conducted by the colored race without violence, or disorder, or excessive rancor. The power which they held they put fairly at hazard with each recurring election. They neither cheated nor intimidated nor sought to intimidate their opponents. Their popular assemblages listened with respect and attention to the arguments of their bitterest political foes on those rare occasions when their foes condescended to address them with argument. Public order was maintained. Crime was detected and punished. Life and property were as safe as in most of the States.

There was a period of official corruption and profligacy in the States in which the colored vote predominated, extending generally from 1869 to 1874. It arose from causes already explained. It was confined to official life ; it was produced and inspired by a few leaders who had, for purposes of plunder, made their way to public places. As in the similar condition of affairs which prevailed in the city of New York from 1866 to 1873, official corruption at the South for a time baffled investigation and defied public sentiment. In its worst stages it did not equal this description, given by the "Committee of Seventy," of corruption in New York : "It has bought Legislatures, controlled Governors, corrupted newspapers, defiled courts of justice, violated the ballot-box, threatened all forms of civil and religious liberty, awed the timid rich, bribed the toiling masses, and cajoled respectable citizens, and has finally grown so strong and reckless as to openly defy the intelligence and virtue which is believed to be inert, voiceless, and powerless to stay its aggressions, or to assert the supremacy of honesty and justice." Southern corruption assumed more grotesque, and perhaps more offensive forms, than were displayed elsewhere ; but it was never so powerful, daring, or pervasive as in other sections of the country. It never polluted the sources of political power ; it never violated the ballot-box ; it never bribed the "toiling masses." It may be said with perfect truth that the colored voters of the South never sustained public men whom they believed to be corrupt. They adhered with rare fidelity to those who had once gained their confidence. But, whenever a public man was shown to be corrupt, the colored voters rejected him with as much certainty and promptness

as the voters of the North have shown. It is not true—with whatever frequency or confidence the assertion may have been made—that the colored race of the South deliberately or consciously sustained leaders or public officers who were found guilty of dishonest conduct or corrupt practices. Such leaders and officers were deprived of office and power. From 1873 till 1876, when political power was violently wrested from them, it is the truth of history that there was at the South a steady progress toward good government, purity of administration, reform of abuses, and the choice of capable and honest public officers, in those States in which the colored race had most complete control. There were here, as there are in all communities, sham reformers. At periods of special excitement, or under peculiar influences and circumstances, the reform movement was checked, and corrupt and dishonored leaders seemed for a time to regain power. But such reverses were overcome, and in 1876 those who had most conspicuously shown their ability and courage in the work of reform were in substantial control of the political power of the colored race. In South Carolina, where perhaps official corruption had been greatest, the progress of reform had been such as to compel the acknowledgment, by those who had most violently denounced colored suffrage, that the best assurance of good government in the future lay in the continuance of the power of those who were then successfully working out, through the political party supported by the colored vote, the correction of public abuses.

This condition of affairs, it is to be remembered, was the result solely of the movement for reform within the political party which owed its power mainly to the colored race. The reforms accomplished were demanded and supported by the colored voters. The reform leaders were chosen and sustained in their work by the sympathy and approval of a vast majority of that class of voters. If, as was the fact in the crusade against corruption in New York, party lines could have been disregarded; if the white minority had looked only to securing the best means for reform and good government, the reform movement would have advanced to complete success without serious hindrance or delay. Such coöperation would have been welcomed by the colored race. A better agency for peaceful and permanent reform was never presented. The colored race by nature and habit were mild, peaceful, order-loving, teachable, patient, and religious. Taught by such influences and methods as are made use of in other States, this race would have yielded to

the sway of reason and justice in their political conduct, far more readily than did the masses through which for a time corrupt leaders and public officers maintained their power in New York. The work of maintaining good government without the aid and with the hostility of the greater part of the class possessing property and education must always be extremely difficult. No people or race that has shown itself able, under such conditions, to establish wise and liberal constitutions and laws, to set in successful operation the great agencies which produce and uphold our best civilization, and, when attacked and wellnigh overcome by official corruption and profligacy, to defeat and destroy this enemy, and to restore the rule of public integrity and honor, is without the very highest title to exercise the rights and assume the duties of self-government. This title the colored race earned by their conduct from 1868 to 1876.

The fact of the present suppression and overthrow of colored suffrage at the South is now made the ground of the argument that the race was not equal to the duties of self-government. It is said that every people worthy of freedom and self-government will have freedom and self-government. It is said that the inability of a people to cope, in physical and material resources, with its enemies, is proof that such a people is not entitled to retain its political power. Such conclusions are as illogical as they are immoral. Under the principles of our Government and of all just government, rights are not dependent on numbers or physical strength or material resources. The right to vote, and to have that vote honestly counted—the right to hold and exercise the political power conferred by a majority of the votes when honestly counted—these are rights, under our Government, totally independent of the power or wealth or education of the voters. If at any time or in any place these rights are denied or defeated, there the most characteristic principle of our political system is dishonored. Nor is it an answer to this to say—even if the statement were true in any sense—that better government has been secured by the defeat of the will of a majority of the voters. In the first place, there can be no legitimate State government, good or bad, under our system, which does not derive its title from the actual legal result of the votes cast. A government otherwise derived is tainted by an original and incurable vice. In the next place, no government, however wise and pure in administration, is worth the price of a violation of the first principles upon which all governments, under our system, must rest. To hold otherwise is to make government dependent

for its sanction, not on the consent of the governed nor on the will of the majority, but on the consent and will of any number or combination of persons who may chance to possess the preponderance of physical strength and resources.

The present political supremacy of the white race in at least five of the Southern States is the result of the violent exclusion or fraudulent suppression of the colored vote. No honest and well-informed man will question this. In South Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana, the result has been reached by a system of deliberate, organized violence in all its forms, supplemented and crowned by the most daring and stupendous election frauds. It is an intolerable affront to every sentiment of humanity or dictate of justice, to argue that any results secured by such means are less detestable than the atrocities and crimes by which they were wrought. Whoever prevents any lawful voter from casting his vote, or constrains him to cast it contrary to his will, or deprives it, when cast, of its equal share in determining the result of the election, is guilty of a palpable and vulgar fraud. The defense of such fraud, by a reference to any results which may follow, is a specimen of degrading Jesuitism.

What morality and reason thus affirm, experience confirms. The only serious menace to the prosperity, unity, and life of the nation has proceeded directly from a departure from the doctrine of equal civil and political rights—the claim and exercise of exclusive political control by a few over the many. The South from 1789 to 1860 was the complete type and embodiment of communities in which political power is held exclusively by property and education. By a law as sure and uniform in its results as the operations of Nature, these communities became oligarchies in the most odious sense of the term, hostile in spirit and action to all republican ideas. In seventy years from the foundation of the Government “ordained to establish justice and secure the blessings of liberty,” the wealth, education, and piety of the South stood ready, sword in hand, to destroy that Government, and to maintain in its place a government proclaimed by its founders to rest on the corner-stone of human slavery. And to-day again, as in 1860, the same oligarchical power, crushing the colored race under its feet, seeks with bloody and rapacious hands to grasp the national power as the agency through which it may extend and perpetuate its own spirit and practice of caste and oppression.

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